

The narrative identity of people with dementia can be preserved and engaged with using immersive spaces

SENSE-GARDEN: An innovative approach to delivering individualized reminiscence therapy in dementia care

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INTRODUCTION

The loss of self in dementia is primarily a result of the ways in which others view and treat the individual, rather than a cause of the disease itself.¹ A sense of self can be maintained even in later stages of dementia, with narrative identity being preserved through the help of others, such as family members.² Technology offers new ways for engaging with the life story of people with dementia. The SENSE-GARDEN is a room that combines multisensory stimuli and digital media to create individualized spaces within dementia care settings. The immersive space is used to help residents connect with family members and care staff. The approach to using SENSE-GARDEN builds on techniques from reminiscence therapy, which encourages the individual to remember and reflect upon people, places, and events from their lives.³

The aim of this project is to assess the effects of the SENSE-GARDEN on the well-being of older adults living with moderate to severe dementia⁴.

METHODS

Four SENSE-GARDENS have been built in dementia care settings across Norway, Belgium, Portugal and Romania. A controlled, before-after multisite trial using standardized outcome measures, observations and semi-structured interviews began in September 2019*.

RESULTS

Initial findings from qualitative interview data suggest that the SENSE-GARDEN can facilitate meaningful experiences between people with dementia and caregivers.

Care staff indicated that they saw the person with dementia in a different way by using SENSE-GARDEN together. Participants with dementia also expressed that they found using SENSE-GARDEN to be a positive experience.

"Things that you have experienced long time ago get into your head again ... I think it was an **amazing experience**."
(Person with dementia)

"You see the **person and not the patient** ... and that's a big difference"
(Professional caregiver)

"The experience itself has probably caused me to **open my eyes to small things that I have not noticed before**. Things I had no idea meant anything to him ... I've **learned more about appreciating our 60 years of life** and all the 21,000 days we have had"
(Family member)

DISCUSSION

The SENSE-GARDEN offers an innovative approach to reminiscence-based activities in dementia care. The space offers an immersive environment which encourages people with dementia to engage in their life story. The space also encourages other individuals such as family and care staff to connect with the unique story of the person with dementia. Future work in this project will assess quantitative outcomes on participant well-being, which will provide further insights into the benefits of using new technologies in dementia care.

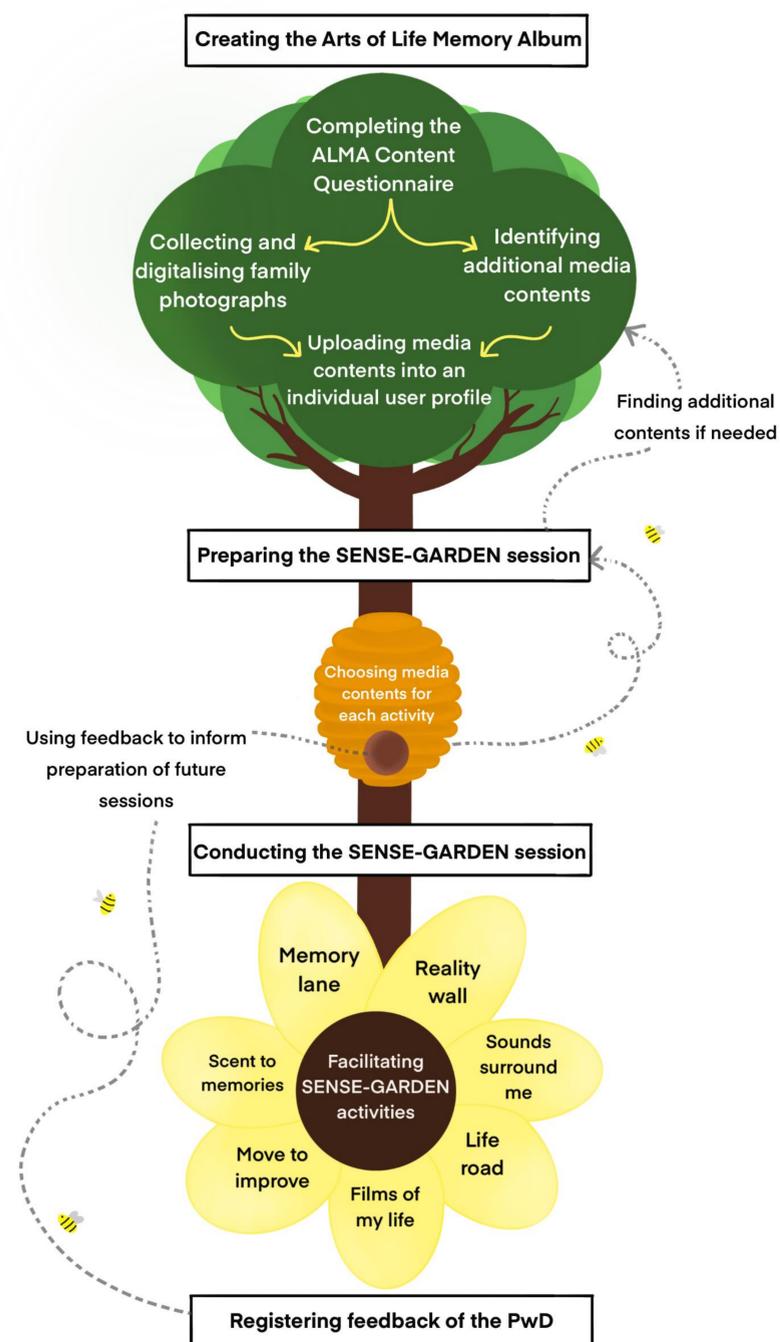


Figure 1. Overview of the SENSE-GARDEN preparation and facilitation process

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Care staff should be supported in learning more about the life story of residents of dementia, as this may improve the caring relationship.
- Future work on implementing new technologies and approaches into care should explore the experiences of all users (residents, family, staff) from a holistic perspective.

